THEMA ;

an ORV zine

「Every story has a thema. Even in a story without a thema, the thema is ‘there is no thema’.」

— ORV Chapter 342

EDITOR'S NOTE

This is a story about a story.

THEMA; an Omniscient Reader's Viewpoint Fanzine is a venture of love. We loved and love this story. As a display of our affection, we aimed to explore the events and thematic elements found in the original novel. This includes topics such as death, grief, reincarnation, isolation, complicated relationships, love (in all forms), and more. Some contributor works will touch on these heavy topics. Please exercise caution while reading.

Thank you to our contributors, for making this zine a reality; our moderators, for making this project a possibility; and to you. Because a story isn't a story without a reader.

- Rook, on behalf of the *THEMA*; mod team

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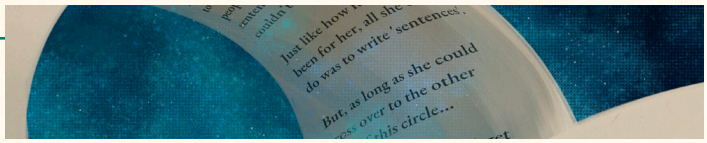

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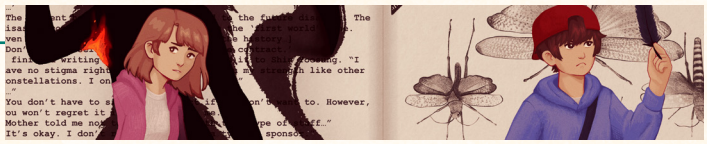

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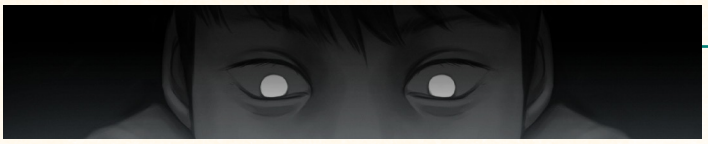

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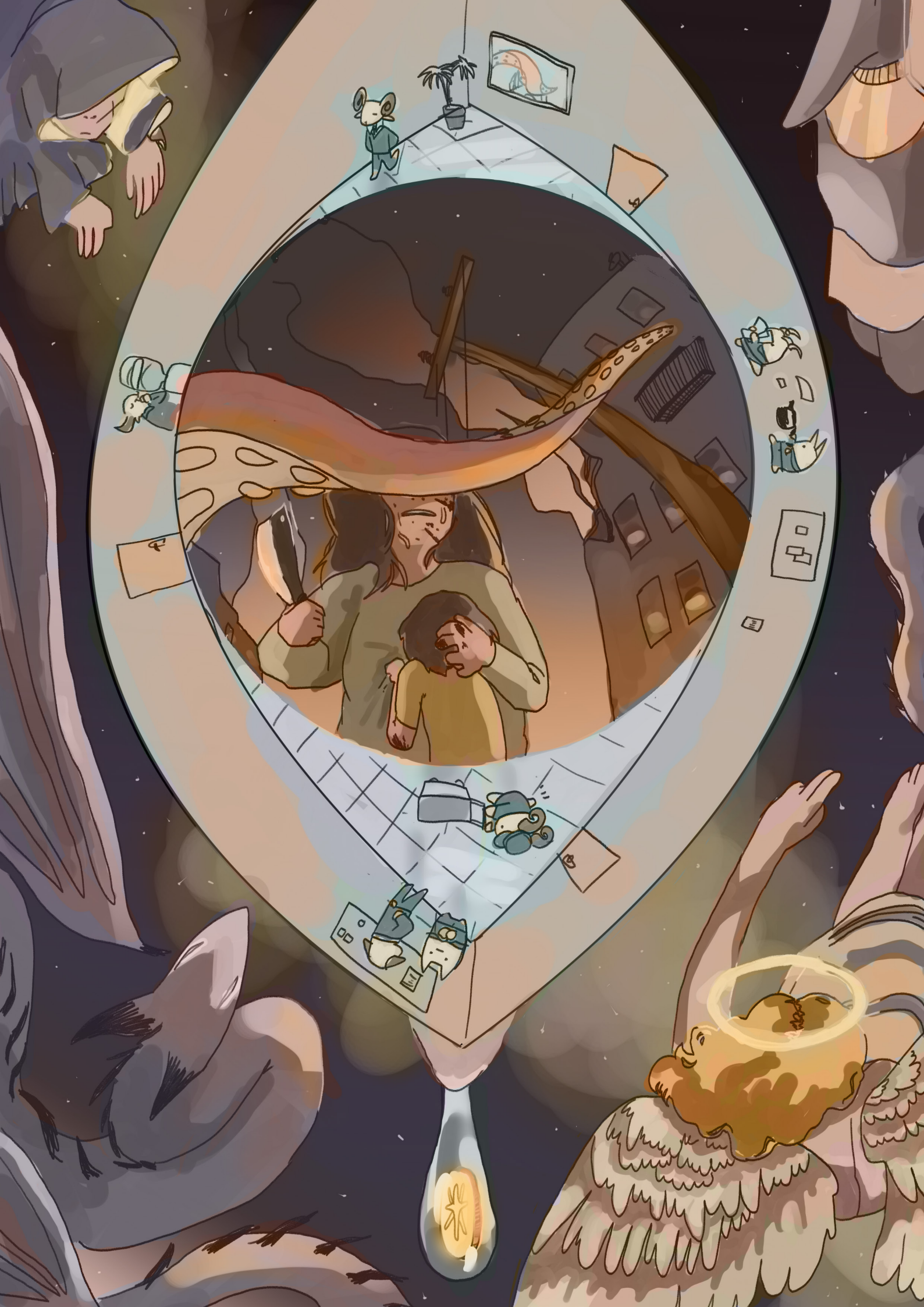


THE STORIES WE TELL INSIDE THE STORIES THEY WERE FIRST TOLD

WRITTEN BY SHEN

Plenty of literary works have taken part in the act of borrowing. This act could take form in the lending of languages, in the adapting of genres, or in the referencing of cultures. It is not a new practice; it's an act that predates what we may know of history, as all beings are always in the push-and-pull of influence. As the saying goes: *You are what you eat.* You create what you've seen in creation. What you consume, you not only digest, you also come out of it to do this act—borrowing.

This act doesn't limit itself word-by-word, verbatim, but vision-to-vision, an idea born from another idea. Kafka is rarely ever quoted; he lives on as his visions. As his name. You have the world borrowing the life he's left behind: *Kafka's Trial, Kafka's Hell-Paradise, Kafka on the Shore.* This is not dissimilar to stories. To traditions. To an entire telling of a culture. To Omniscient Reader's Viewpoint, stories are almost all it has. It is a story of a story of a story. It is in a constant cycle of borrowing. In its text, the three central characters cannot exist without taking something from each other. It is a story that cannot escape salvaging. It can't help but force itself to take a form. In this novel, there is a borrowing that is in its most intimate—to be the literal embodiment, the form given flesh—incarnations.

Incarnations, in the novel's text, exist initially contradicting their label. They are named "incarnations" the moment they step into a scenario. Yet what are they borrowing? Who are they embodying? No one yet. Nothing, it seems. But this story, as stated, is in a constant cycle of borrowing. These incarnations, at their earliest, embody the story their now-world has taken form of. These incarnations, taken further, become constellations, who borrow even more; they come from history, mythology, traditions. Their names are mirrors, their true bodies homages, their stories taken from someone else's mouth.

To say these constellations are purely taken from their origin stories would be amiss, however, as they are more, in fact, reimagined. Reinterpreted. A tale weaving another tale. Yet what stands is that they are still borrowed in essence, ranging from their modifiers, their nebulae, reaching even their sponsored incarnations.

The easiest illustration of this reinterpretation is Nirvana Moebius, one of Sakyamuni's notable incarnations in-text. The name is a giveaway in itself: *nirvana,* being a key concept to a handful of Dharmic religions, already tells you enough. It is termed as salvation, or what it's most commonly known for as enlightenment. Though it seems to only be a surface-level kind of influence, to take only names and terms and concepts and paste it into an

evolving, currently existing story without much thought for the meaning it holds—Nirvana signifies a person's freedom from rebirth, yet Nirvana Moebius is a known reincarnator—what must stay with you is the intention of their naming. It doesn't claim to be original, the first of its time, and follows through its borrowing even in-text, with the characters aware that several constellations are from their Earth's stories.

This kind of borrowing present in the novel is one that recognizes itself. It does not pretend to be faithful; to be truthful to the story it was pulled from. It does not entirely ignore it, either. With this act, it isn't uncommon. You make off with something familiar to build an easy image, and dress it according to your vision but justify it enough to make it stick. This shows often in media that open or close themselves with *Based on...* or perhaps *From the...* then maybe *Inspired by...* or, really, there could be no mentions at all, given that they've been used well enough to be commonplace. As for the novel, it's used several names identifiable by the public, taking us back to Nirvana Moebius, a staunch name (for, at least, Nirvana) easily attached to a religion like Buddhism. Its faithfulness to its story varies in where you look—where you draw the line. If looked at from another angle, this influence may not only stretch towards their monikers, but even their characteristics as a nod to the origin's teachings and traditions.

In Buddhism, they have what is called the doctrine of "non-self", termed as anattā; stating that no self can be permanent or existent. You can have your senses, your vices, your heart, your feelings, but not a self. This is echoed in the concept of reincarnation as well, as put by Lafcadio Hearn in *In Ghostly Japan (1899),* "Such a one might be reborn in a world of desire, — like this, — but neither as a woman only, nor as a man only." It could now be possibly mirrored in ORV, taking the form of Nirvana Moebius who has stated that they are not a man, nor a woman. This is Buddhist teaching bleeding into text—however, it isn't the only one.

Take Uriel and Jung Heewon. This borrowing is picture-perfect on the surface. You have Uriel in Christian traditions: (1) the one whose hands hold the sun; (2) the archangel with the flaming sword; (3) the angel of judgement and repentance. It does not run far from Uriel herself in the novel, quite literally with the modifier Demon-like Judge of Fire and Jung Heewon, her incarnation, now appropriating Uriel's judgement patronage as the Judge of Destruction.

Now, then, take Yoo Sangah and Anna Croft. They seem different enough from each other until you place their sponsors side-by-side. Early in the novel, Yoo Sangah's sponsor was the entirety of Olympus. Anna Croft's, in comparison, was the entirety of Asgard. These two nebulae who've borrowed from traditions that followed polytheism, the belief of multiple deities, sponsored only *one* incarnation. Almost as if in a way, if an incarnation was to take a constellation based on a polytheistic religion as their sponsor, it cannot only be one god—the rest of the deities in the nebula come as well. Almost as if in a way, sponsorship in-text is the equivalent of worship.

All these, in their truest forms, can be considered as "incarnating." These different traditions, teachings, and beliefs have been incarnated inside the novel, a part of the story it has told, and is still telling.

This is a way of saying that stories do not die. This is a way of saying that stories cannot live without this taking. This borrowing.

Everything we tell may bleed into something else whether knowingly or unknowingly—and it is present everywhere. It's present in a book you've been keeping for years on your shelf. It's present on a billboard miles away from you. It's present in the back of a shampoo bottle. It's a passing phrase, a local business' name, a clothing brand, a title card of a movie. Whatever it is, it came from something. Whatever it could be, it has an origin. And whatever it's going to become, it has a story.

THE STORY OF KIM DOKJA

WAS SOMETHING DEFINED

SINCE BIRTH.

DOKJA FOR "LONE CHILD"

DOKJA FOR "READER"

HE FULFILLED HIS ASSIGNED ROLE TO PERFECTION-

THE LONE READER, HIDDEN IN A CLOSET,

SURVIVING ON WORDS,

..DREAMING OF THINGS THAT COULDN'T BE.

AND SO, THE PREDETERMINED TRAGEDY CONTINUED

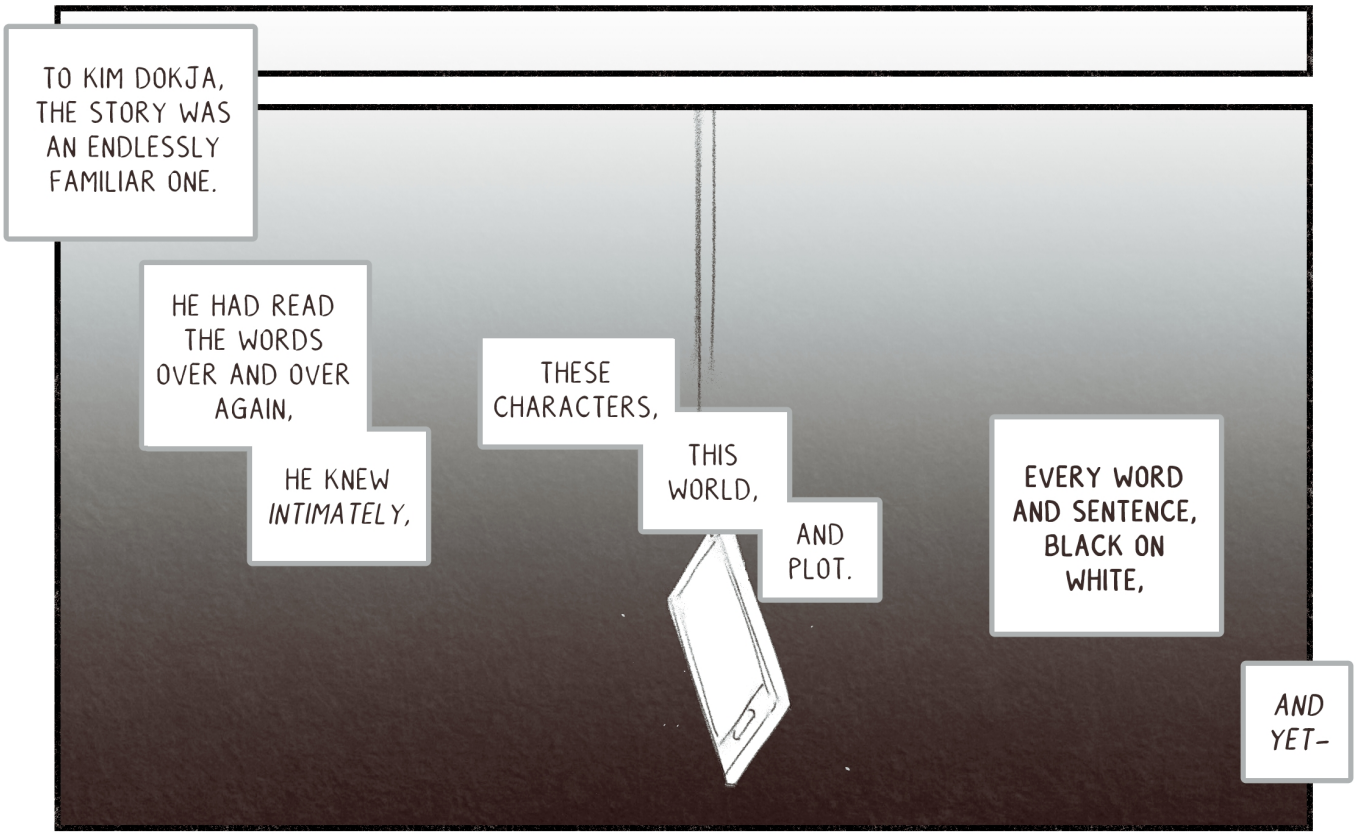
THROUGH GRADUATION,

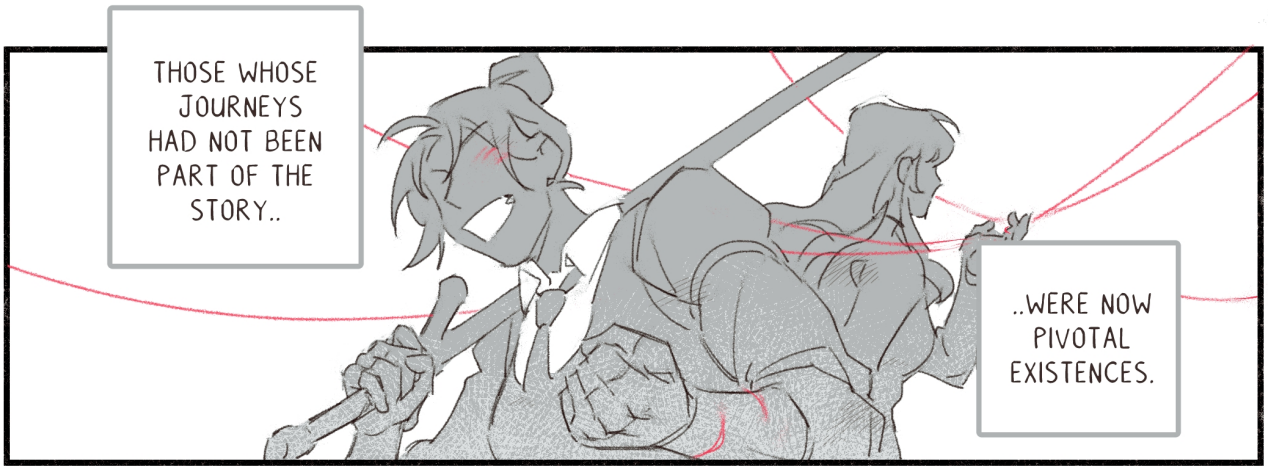
MILITARY SERVICE,

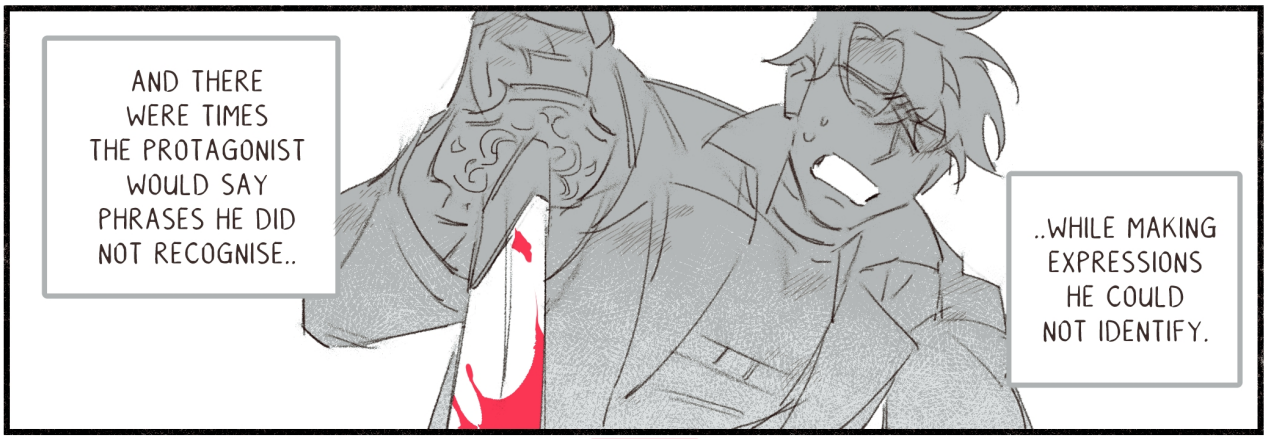
EMPLOYMENT,

UNTIL

BAM!
THE BEGINNING OF THE SCENARIOS.


TO KIM DOKJA, THE STORY WAS AN ENDLESSLY FAMILIAR ONE.
HE HAD READ THE WORDS OVER AND OVER AGAIN,
HE KNEW *INTIMATELY*,
THESE CHARACTERS,
THIS WORLD,
AND PLOT.
EVERY WORD AND SENTENCE, BLACK ON WHITE,
AND YET–


THOSE WHOSE JOURNEYS HAD NOT BEEN PART OF THE STORY..
..WERE NOW PIVOTAL EXISTENCES.


AND THERE WERE TIMES THE PROTAGONIST WOULD SAY PHRASES HE DID NOT RECOGNISE..
..WHILE MAKING EXPRESSIONS HE COULD NOT IDENTIFY.

AND

THE STORY OF THE LONE READER..
..BECAME INEXPLICABLY TIED TO A 'COMPANY' OF MANY.

IT WASN'T UNPLEASANT, BUT..

..IS THIS REALLY ALRIGHT ..?
...
..DID I PERHAPS DIVERGE TOO MUCH?
RIGHT, I SHOULD REREAD AND-
OI!
WHAT THE HELL'RE YOU MUTTERING ON YOUR OWN ABOUT?!
FORGET ABOUT THAT SHITTY WEBNOVEL ALREADY-
WE'RE WRITING OUR OWN STORY!
..BUT
LOOK, I'M TELLING YOU-!
IT'S COMPLETELY POSSIBLE FOR WORDS AND STORIES-
TO GAIN NEW MEANINGS, YOU KNOW?
.....
.....
.....
.....
..AH.
DON'T JUST "AH"!
AREN'T YOU SUPPOSED TO KNOW THIS AS A READER?!

Assignment 41: Web Novels as Biographic Vehicles

Prompt: Write an excerpt for a philosophical biography about the subject of your choice utilizing the style and genre conventions of a web novel. You are free to write about anyone in your life, be it a public figure or a personal figure, so long as you know them. By utilizing web novel conventions and limits, explore the subject's motivations and life philosophy and distill them into a single story.

I take it you had a lot of fun doing this assignment. Both the genre conventions and information seem to be... well-researched... relatively, anyway.

Kim Namseon
Prof. Han Sooyoung
MPHIL041

Chosen Genre(s): Fusion Fantasy, Villainess Oh boy. You must read a lot of villainess novels & your love for this genre shows...

As the Sovereign witnessed the perfect catastrophe borne of her creation, the hands upon her keyboard twitched with delight. In a fit of delirious frenzy, her dainty fingers danced upon the keys, forming a continuous stream of inky black that corroded through her screen and seeped into the very fabric of the universe.

Character upon character, word upon word, seamlessly weaving themselves into timespace, creating and melding new realities— such a thing was mere child's play for the Sovereign, Her Highness the Black Flames Empress. ???

For years, many had looked down upon her craft – deeming it inane and almost boorish. It was unbecoming, unbefitting of a high standing lady. Few could understand her true genius, the convoluted darkness of her twisted mind. You must be having fun.

But now? Now, she had become their God.

??? Is this supposed to be a subversion of the harem trope on this genre??

A God whose mere flick of the wrist could have cities crumbling and men crawling at her feet. Her devotees are numerous and ever-growing; a testament to her prowess – they had, on this stage she had set herself, become the foot soldiers upon her personal chess board.

Even those of the rivaling faction, the one she had to fool with her perfected faux groveling, were mere pawns whose destinies laid in the palm of her hands. Puppets loosely strung for her high, noble goals. → nice imagery, though inconsistent with your chess analogy!!

The world had been hers from the start. But not everyone was wise enough to acknowledge it.

One such eyesore had been her most persistent rival ?? – the Moonlight Heroine. ??? She's NOT my rival

As her name would suggest, she had been a most perfect, lovely girl borne from a good, though humble family. Her supposed kindness knew no bounds, with the threads of fate in her hands she had smitten the pawns Mistress Han had intended for use.

WHY.

Mistress Han, Sovereign of the Black Flames, had never come from such humble beginnings. She had always been born fit to rule, blessed with the wealth and acuity one would expect of a political heiress.However, driven by the Moon's sweetened manipulation, these pawns had come to scorn her methods – calling them vile, unsophisticated, merciless.

Still, she stood her ground. Her Highness knew – such kindness was a mere luxury in the new world; the world that hath born anew.

~~Was it really??~~

The Moon could rule over the tides, but the Black Flames will scorch the entire world – rebirthing it flawlessly.

???

Lending the aid of her noble multiplicities, she had herself play queen, rook, knight, and bishop within the play she had written herself.

Her most perfect ending had always been within reach. doubtful

She had only been gracious in allowing these lines on a page to revel in her companionship, as believers would their creator. In doing so, she had allowed them to gain purpose, to gain humanity that they had previously lacked. ??

With her own hands, she would forge their destinies in ink.

This piece was certainly... interestingly put together [illegible] you to NOT use gossiprags or shady forums as your sole [illegible] some embellishments are fine considering the genre, but more [illegible] the [illegible] HOURS

I'm going to be honest.
This is probably one of the weakest pieces I've seen so far.
It's only a little better than that other Muhyeop piece (~~that is Song of the Demon Sword~~) (nothing to be proud of. BTW.)

Lee Jisoo
Sooyoung ~~Unni~~ *I'm not your unni! Though I understand my beautiful & youthful appearance may be deceiving.*
I forgot the title of your lecture… *Then why bother attending? Isn't this your 2nd time retaking this class At this point it's better to just drop it, don't you think? Can't even bother to remember the class you're taking... should I bother grading this assignment, then??*

Chosen Genre(s): Action, Muhyeop, Fusion Fantasy *again??*

wow. thanks for the advance notice I guess

Han Sooyoung wakes with a jolt, breathing hard into her lungs. *Wow. didn't know we breathe into our lungs. that's why I'm a lit major.*

The rolling waves and devastation around her, it is just a dream. But the night is warm, eerily so.

why is she touching the fire???

She scowls at the bonfire, crackling away before her, at the heat of its flames, and the lightness of its touch. She grimaces as she paces about, examining the sleeping faces surrounding it — a merchant, the stranger to whom she now owed her life; a wandering martial artist, whose eyes would pointedly speak of justice, punishing scum like her; and a child, rotten at its core — an unborn volcano, soon to erupt.

The hand holding the dagger behind her back trembles.

WOW! This child is just like you whenever you attend my lectures! Is this why this entire section lacks clear subject indicators?

This is still a child, who barely turns as she sleeps. Such luxury only few can afford in Murim — the strongest of the strong whose breath can extinguish flames in their sleep, and the weakest of the weak, who can only tremble into nothingness at the mere presence of a greater being.

Lee Jisoo, I think you also need to retake basic Korean :)

This child — she is both.She will bring forth a flood much greater than gods. And with it, she will wipe Murim clean. *Spacing!!!*

Han Sooyoung is no martial artist, let alone a taoist. Principles such as "do not take the life of another needlessly" have never applied to her. She has done this countless times before. Not by choice, but—

There was certainly an ATTEMPT here. This makes very little sense!! and yes. you do get points for that. BUT.

In truth, there has never been a choice to begin with. This world is predetermined, and she knows this for certain, because—

If it were predetermined, what's the point of granting her with visions? And why her specifically?

This is what had been written, in the old prophecy — one that she had witnessed and penned with her own hand.

where did they come from? ~~they~~

In her old life, she had barely came of age when the visions had struck her. Being a woman of her land, she took it upon herself to write the terrible calamities she'd seen in her dreams, brought it to her detested father, whom she called Emperor, in the hopes of changing the future, of earning herself a little redemption. Instead, she got a beheading.

WHY! Why is she so stubborn to save a world that rejected her? When she's already died once because of it.

Now reborn as a lonely vagrant, she starts on her stubborn quest to save the Murim she lives in. *??*

Your writing gave no indication of her internal motivations to "save" this world. Just because she lives in it, doesn't mean she'd try this hard to save it! Did she do this purely out of the "goodness" of her heart?

Are you kidding me.

Hers is no such clean justice that the woman, Martial Artist Jung would agree on. Her hands have long been stained by those she's slain, and she lives in the solitude of her own words.

Her grip tightens upon the handle and she aims for the neck and yet–

It stops mid air as the light catches upon the child's face, and her gaze soon falls upon the man, whose cruel kindness had saved her, and the woman, whose fate eluded her. She had given her word to them, in name and blood, and they had shared their food with her, and warmth in the cold.

you used this word 3x in 2 consecutive sentences. If you liked it so much, should I help officiate the wedding? I hope you & "upon" live a happy life together!

She is not used to such kindness. She has always acted alone. And this child is definitely a weapon. And yet– *? WHOSE*

WHY ARE THEY SLEEPING ON WET SOIL? DO THEY WANT A FREE MUD BATH?

The dagger slips through her grip and slinks into the damp earth.

WHAT IS SHE? A prey Animal??

She slinks back into her corner.

Perhaps the words in the prophecy can be changed. And perhaps, so can she.

it seems you're ultimately more concerned with the external events ~~of the story~~ than the subject's actual internal conflicts & motivations, which are the CORE of the story. ; TLDR: YOU FAILED! Come see me in my office this Monday. ASAP!!

Han Seongah
Prof. Han Sooyoung
Reading Modern Philosophy through Webnovels

Chosen genre: Romance Fantasy, Bildungsroman, Gothic Horror

To Lady Han, it felt a little like death. The pen was indeed *her* sword; sharp as the blade may be, its touch was the closest thing to a home. Its weight in her hand was the gravity that rooted her away from the darkness of the ceiling, from where her mother hung.

On days like these, the sun would filter through the glass panes, and she would sit herself among these greeneries to receive it. The parchment paper would sit still, caged between her arms, receiving all she would give.

The young lady of the Han house exudes elegance, but her treatment of such fine stationery was quite unforgiving. It was not so rare of an occasion that the ink would bleed through its pages. Violent lines after violent lines etched on with more exertion they would ever require, maintaining only a shred of their delicacy within the fragile confines of her delicate prose. On other days, her tears would fall like rain upon those pages, blending and smudging the ink, turning the letters illegible and the paper, damp, vulnerable.

In that moment, there was only her and that story.

In that greenhouse, that seemed to behold the entire world.

Nothing outside of that mattered.

Not the noise. Nor the filthy blood on the floor. Nor the spilled guts in the living room. All that mess her father made. Nor the void that shall come to be. That shall come unto her.

In her room, by her lonesome.

In the dark, at night.

"Young lady." The voice of her old butler rang and shattered the fragile spell.

Han Sooyoung sat frozen stiff. The metal nib of her pen had pierced through the parchment, impaling it onto the fine wooden table. The ink bled. And bled. And bled –

"Your father wants to see you."

Her hands tensed, and twitched, and soon the ink was spilled and the bottle had rolled, and fell and shattered on the damp floor.

Her butler could only offer her a worried glance, sympathetic, before continuing with his assault. "Marriage talks are back on the table."

It was always like that with him. Marriage. Contracts. Bargaining chips. Those were the only reasons he would ask to see her. A mere pawn at his disposal. The hidden illegitimate daughter of a famed court official. No one knew she was there. Sometimes, not even herself.

"Fine." She bit out. "Tell him I shall be there."

The butler bowed, then upon attempting to approach–

She stood, her head held high, imposing despite her stature.

"Don't bother. I'll do it myself."

I would begrudge you on the Melodrama, but this is ~~unfortunately~~ 1 of the better-pieces I've seen so far!

wow look. someone who bothered to remember the title of the lecture!

(unnecessary) you can add this detail?

What a combo

~~Did~~

??? Did you add this genre just ~~so~~ so

drastic tonal shift. Intentional?

Could do with better phrasing but it's fine.

Great application of RomFan style convention here!

You're really laying it thick with the dramatism here!

I understand dramatism but this is... excessive

What was the point in all this.

?!

? HEY.

RomFan was not the genre I'd expect you'd ...go for, for this subject's story. But your execution made it ~~half~~ bearable

There was certainly - what I can only hope to be - an earnest attempt to dissect the ~~person's~~ subject's values & philosophy, but it ultimately veers too much towards pathologization esp. of her dramatized past

So Han Seongah, I'll still have to see you in my office! (Monday!!)

The butler bowed once more, and went back to whence he came.

OK FYI silk does nothing for ink stains.

With that, she snatched the piles of paper with haste, wiped the ink stains with her silk kerchief and with the turn of her heel, crushed what remained of the bottle under her heel.

To Lady Han, even such deaths were mournful secrets. Ones she would keep strictly beside her as companions to the world thereafter.

~~Honestly I'm a little concerned with how you kids see me now?? What have you all been reading from those trashy tabloids??~~

WOW. HAN SOOYOUNG AS A MUHYEOP HERO? I'VE SEEN IT ALL. ← Jung heewon stop ~~fucking~~ writing on my stuff!

LEE JIYOUNG

MUHYEOP (FAIL)

- mess. Worst of the 3, 2nd worst in class.
- Technicalities aside, completely missed the point of the assignment and seems to lack understanding of the basics/foundations ~~of~~ story writing. Not necessarily a character driven vs plot driven thing, but. The character here just completely lacks. character

NOTES for further instruction:

- make up assignment:
  - ↳ Book report/essay on basics of character writing + Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes
  - ↳ option: Do this or fail (again)
- Redo the assignment:
  - ↳ rewrite the entire excerpt.
  - ↳ submit a paper on the character breakdown (analysis, to ~~make~~ show ~~sure proper work~~ the process ~~(make her suffer)~~
- New deadline: I'll decide whenever Well, preferably sometime this week.

Have the TA handle this bit. I don't care!!! I wanna go home early!

Sooyoung unni... are u seriously telling ur students to write about u?? → I didn't

KIM NAMSEON

VILLAINESS, FUSFAN

- Decent execution, but it's somewhat lacking in substance
- adherence to genre conventions + appropriate thematic choice, but falls a bit flat in delivery, comes off a bit lackluster/hollow
- P.S. Gotta talk to Yoo Sangah's publicist about these gossip tags

→ oh? What business do you need w/ her? ... Ah just read it. How funny.

Why muhyeop of all genres... Yoo Sangah's alley than mine.

Also Jihye! stop writing on my students' papers! ↑ you're doing it it too, though? ↗ 4 corrections! I'm their teacher!

actually a bit confused w/ the genre. I expected something more reminiscent of the tower climbing/walking variety... Why involve Yoo Sangah in this of all people...

HAN SEONGAH

ROMFAN, FUSFAN (PASS)

- one of the more decently written & executed ones
- clear adherence to genre conventions + motivations
- overt pathologization of the subject. Why do my students love psychoanalyzing me??
- → note to self: find out who's been leaking my shit past to the press. It's so hard being a celebrity.

Honestly feel like this genre is more

↑ PASS but still need to see me.

↑ PASS.. though I loathe to do so.

→ OH Fuck. She wants me to get groceries today: eggs... rice... coffee. Did we run out of toilet paper?

Unni, this is ur grocery list. nothing educational about it → also ya! we're out of toilet paper!

The morning hours passe
That af Shin ty and magic ched the
scenar of lev that it was tim ght the
Spons tact from hyung grumbled but ve me
the c act.
[…You know what nge the disaster?]
'…'
[The ent to the future disa The
disas he 'first world' e.
Even the history…]
'Don' contract.'
I fini writing it to Shin Yoosung. "I
have no stigma right my strength like other
constellations. I on "
"…"
"You don't have to si if on't want to. However,
you won't regret it me.
"Mother told me not t ype of stuff…"
"It's okay. I don't r sponsor."
"If I sign this, I c onstellation?"
"Yes."
Shin Yoosung nodde "Okay elieve in
Ahjussi."
[The Sponsor Co]
[You have becom rnati Yo ung.']
A brilliant li me a n oosung.
Unlike the t, a age po p.
[You aren't ion. Y le to use m t of the
functions o
[List of A tions]
[1. Sponso tion.]
[2. Encour nation.]
Well, I had . This was for now.
[The conste soner of the and scoffs.]
[The conste retive Plotter s you on your
first contrac
[5,000 coins sponsored.]
[A number of c tions want to be r.]
The reactions o onstellations were as different from
the time with G du. Shin Yoosung was irect
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crazy over me.
I wasn't a cons on, I was an 'incarnation' an
'incarnation' signed a contract with me Yoosung would
naturally co that constellation as well! ncreased my
number s, the number of constellati wanted me
would y.

Miles Ahead

WRITTEN BY HAN

Shin Yoosung was awakened by the impact on her shoulder.

When she finally managed to lift her heavy eyelids and glance at her surroundings, she found herself sitting in the middle of a train cart with a digital camera sitting on her lap. A sigh of relief escaped her lips as she noticed the camera strap around her neck. Thankfully, the train was near empty, or else she might have fallen victim to some sticky-fingered fellows.

"Hm."

The sound of humming coming from her left side caused Yoosung to shift her attention. The source of the sound was still leaning their head against her left shoulder, with their arms crossed and their snapback covering a good portion of their face. Yoosung waited for a while and watched as her fellow train passenger slowly opened their eyes.

Once they were finally face-to-face with one another, Yoosung asked,

"Good nap?"

"Good nap," Lee Gilyoung responded, before turning his head in different directions as he performed a series of light stretches. "Where are we?"

The train announcement answered his question faster than Yoosung could.

The next stop is Sillim Station. Sillim Station. Passengers traveling to Sillim line on the blue line may transfer at this station.

"Somewhere just before Sillim station," Yoosung added.

Gilyoung nodded his head. "Cool, just two more stations left then. What else is on our to-do list besides Dokja-hyung's former office building?"

Yoosung checked the notes on her phone before replying, "I think that should be it. We can always take pictures of everything else we see along the way. I bet ahjussi would love to see it."

"Everything must have looked so new and different to hyung," Gilyoung muttered in response, visibly trying to stifle a yawn.

"Well, if everything stayed the same, we wouldn't be spending our weekend doing this in the first place, right?"

Gilyoung merely shrugged in response. The train moved once again.

The topic was first brought up when the two of them had their regular weekend lunch with Kim Dokja. Somehow, between Gilyoung sharing how Lee Jihye managed to get a limited edition *goguma* bread and Yoosung showing pictures of the university buildings, both teenagers realized just how different the current Seoul must have been to Kim Dokja. While both of them were more than willing to accompany Kim Dokja should the latter ever decide to venture into the city, the man was still not physically fit enough to even leave the hospital bed for a long period of time.

"I cannot wait until Seolhwa-ssi says it's okay for me to leave the hospital."

After pondering Kim Dokja's words and situations, both Gilyoung and Yoosung came to the same conclusion - if they cannot take Kim Dokja to see the new and changed Seoul, then they just have to bring the city to him. By taking pictures of the new Seoul, putting them side by side with the ones of the old city, and compiling it all in one book, they would be able to show Kim Dokja just how much the city has changed and perhaps motivate him even more to attend his routine physiotherapy sessions. That was how the two teenagers found themselves walking along the re-established business area where the old building of Mino Soft used to be with a camera in each of their hands.

"I think we've taken enough pictures already," Yoosung said after the two of them finished looking through their camera rolls.

Gilyoung responded by storing his camera back in its case and said, "Then let's go back. I'm starving!"

"When are you ever not?" Yoosung muttered.

"That's rich coming from the resident pizza girl."

"Oh, shut up."

The walk back to the train station was filled with endless chatters and stories. Occasionally, one of them would stop to take a picture of the streets before picking up the pace again. The warm atmosphere and occasional cool breeze made for the perfect walking weather. It wasn't until the third turn that Yoosung realized something and stopped in her tracks.

"Hey, why did you stop?" Gilyoung asked as he watched his friend silently take out her phone.

Yoosung didn't respond. Instead, she tucked her phone back into her jeans pocket and started to run. The sound of Gilyoung calling her name was lost on her as she realized the area where she is currently in. The mini market in the corner, the family restaurant two buildings away from it, all the nooks and crannies - she recognized it all.

It was, after all, the area where she grew up and used to live before everything changed.

Eventually, she stopped running and found herself standing in front of a house. It looked different compared to the one she has in her memories but she supposed that was to be expected. The color of the fence and the walls were all different, but Yoosung knew in her heart that she was currently standing in front of what used to be her old house.

It's funny, she thought to herself, how she could still recall the way back home and yet the memory of her parents' faces seems so blurry in her mind. Did she look more like her father or her mother? What did they sound like? What did they use to do as a family? Why couldn't she remember all these important things? Why did the room start to spin? Why was her cheek

suddenly wet? Why-

"Yoosung!"

The sound of someone calling her name brought Yoosung back to reality and she found herself staring at Gilyoung's face. She could feel his grip on both sides of her shoulders as he asked,

"Are you okay? What happened?"

Ah, Yoosung thought to herself. Was she okay? Truth be told, she wasn't sure of it herself. The feelings of seeing her old family home and not being able to recall her parents' faces were too much for her to handle in one day. Yet, when she tried to speak about it, she found herself at a loss for words. In the end, she settled on closing her eyes and looking down on her feet.

What happened next took her by surprise: Gilyoung pulled her into a hug. Slowly, Yoosung allowed herself the comfort of having someone next to her as she buried her face in his shoulder and put her arms around him. They must have stood there in silence for a long time before Gilyoung eventually pulled away and asked,

"Better?"

This time, however, Yoosung could finally muster an answer. "Better," she said.

"Should we get going?" Gilyoung asked and Yoosung nodded her head in response.

They stayed silent throughout the train ride, though Yoosung never once let go of her friend's hands. Eventually, as they were nearly approaching the apartment building, Gilyoung finally broke the silence.

"Seoul must have changed a lot for you as well, huh?"

"It has," Yoosung replied.

"But you're still here," Gilyoung said before revising his words, "Seoul has changed a lot but you're still here."

Yoosung could feel her friend lightly squeezing her hand as he said those words, a simple gesture that somehow managed to comfort her and tell her that she was not alone in the ever-changing city. She knew that one day she might once again stumble upon some things that reminded her of her old life before the scenarios began. Still, Yoosung decided that the city was too precious for her to not reclaim as her own once again.

The scenarios were over, the constellations were gone, Seoul had changed, and Shin Yoosung had a lot of new memories to make with new people.

「This tale was a story about
an 'impossible communication'.」

Storge

WRITTEN BY OPAL

Hades is dead. Persephone killed him herself.

This is a lie. Hades died at the hands of his brothers, the way he always knew he would go. This is a lie. Persephone hung the sword above his head. This is a lie. She gripped him by the heel then told the whole world where his weakness lay.

They could have lived. They could have survived, even if that life would have been boring and bland, an endless cycle of millennia that were more of the same, fleeing like rats from one burning ship to the next. But now, Hades is dead. And Persephone still lives.

Lee Sookyung wants to know why.

"Why did you save my son?" she asks.

The question is startling for its novelty. Over the years, Persephone has heard demands from many mothers whose children had ventured down to the depths of the Underworld, whose children had come to their deaths.

Their mothers would beg and plead. Some would weep. Some would try to strike a deal. Still others would kneel, and the damp earth would bear witness to their prayers.

Most would ask her, when their sorrow turned to rage, why she *didn't* save their spawn. If she ever intervened, only a rare few would spare some thanks.

It's even rarer that someone questions the grace of the gods. If Persephone still had the full power of her nebula behind her, perhaps she would have found the energy for righteous anger.

Hades would have been angry. Brazen mortals, bold mortals such as Lee Sookyung who had nothing left to lose could put him in a mood as easily as they amused him. But <Underworld> is gone, and Persephone is sore for company, and so Persephone pats the ground.

After a few seconds' hesitation, Lee Sookyung settles on the dew-damp grass across from Persephone. The earth beneath Persephone's fingers is dark and rich. When she takes her hand away, new growth emerges from the soil.

"If you would have your answer," Persephone says, studying the seedling peeking out from the dirt as it continues to grow, "I would have one of my own."

There is a question in Lee Sookyung's eyes. "A trade, then?"

"Yes."

"There is nothing to ensure that we both tell the truth."

"No, I would suppose not." Persephone glances up at Sookyung through her lashes. "And yet, you do not strike me as the type to lie without reason."

Sookyung folds her hands in her lap. "An answer for an answer, then."

Persephone hums, considering. Finally, she says, "The garden we are sitting in, do you know what it once was?"

Lee Sookyung doesn't give a response, nor does Persephone wait for one. "This area was a factory. The building itself was levelled sometime between the fifth and fiftieth main scenarios. Then, over the past four years, even the rubble was razed. And yet, we are both here, because someone thought that this land could be used for a garden. That person died. Then, another person came and they, too, nurtured what grew from this once barren soil until it became what it is today."

Lee Sookyung says, "My son is not a garden."

"No." A smile steals across Persephone's face. "I should say not."

"Then, why did you save him? Why did your husband sacrifice himself to ensure that my son lived?"

"Hades was not much of a gardener," Persephone says. "But the grounds of the <Underworld> were, to me, even more beautiful than those in <Olympus>."

By now, the seedling has put out leaves. The stem sways as it stretches ever upward. From the bud at its tip, deep red petals emerge. Persephone cups the rose in her hand as it blooms.

Hades had liked roses.

Lee Sookyung says, "Ask your question."

Persephone's hand falls away from the rose. She considers Lee Sookyung and her unwavering gaze. "Why did you kill your husband?"

Sookyung doesn't flinch. She was expecting the question, then. "He wasn't a good husband."

"Is that all it was?"

"At first, yes. He drank. He was verbally and physically abusive. I had planned to endure, but—" here, her lips quirk, "—even the best-laid plans can go awry."

Persephone leans in closer. She does so like a good performance, and Lee Sookyung has been perfecting this act for quite some time.

"It wasn't a spur of the moment decision," Persephone says.

It's not a question, but Sookyung takes the cue regardless.

"No," she says. "I had been planning on killing him for quite some time."

"You hated your husband."

"Oh, yes." Lee Sookyung studies her hands, her eyes cast downwards. *Sotto voce*, she says, "I hated him for what he did to me. I hated that no one would ever believe a man like him could hit his wife."

"You loved your son."

"Yes."

"But that love was not enough to make up for the hate you felt towards your husband."

Unflinching: "No."

Persephone breathes in and she can taste the lie on her tongue. She's consumed many stories over the years, but those involving a mother's love for her child are always so much richer.

Menelaus had Troy burn for want of Helen, but Demeter would have let the whole world turn to dust if it meant Persephone's return. Such is the love of a mother.

"If that were truly the case, then I don't believe you would be here right now."

"No?"

"No." Persephone draws out the word. "Your son has not shown himself to be kind to...shall we say, those whose interests do not align with his own."

Lee Sookyung tilts her head ever so slightly. "That child does not forgive easily," she concedes. "Nor does he forget. But, he can be foolish at times."

"Not you, though?"

"No," Lee Sookyung says, and here, she smiles, showing just the hint of teeth. "Not me. Now, I believe that was more than one question."

Persephone smiles back. "It might have been."

Sookyung clasps her hands together in her lap. "Then, if you would, please indulge me by answering my question properly."

"As to why my husband gave his life to save your son?" Persephone cocks her head. "I don't believe I could truly know what he thought in that final battle."

"Then, why did *you* take my son as <Underworld>'s heir?"

"He seemed like a good fit."

Lee Sookyung's eyes are steely. "My answer, please."

Persephone hums. "He was interesting. <Star Stream> has not seen a hero as...audacious as your son in quite some time."

"My son is not a hero," Sookyung says.

"No?" Persephone plucks the rose from its stem and turns it in her hand. "Many would call him theirs."

"Is that all it was?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Because your husband is dead, Lady Persephone. And your nebula is at its weakest now than it has been in millennia. And you don't seem to care."

Black ink drips down, dissipating as it falls. When Persephone opens her hand, the crushed remains of the rose drop to the ground.

She says, in a voice not quite her own, “Careful where you tread, Lee Sookyung.”

“My apologies, Lady Persephone,” Sookyung says quietly. “I didn’t mean to malign your loss.”

It’s an olive branch.

Loss. It’s a strange term, for its novelty. Persephone is alone now, for the first time in thousands of years. Hades is gone. Demeter is gone. <Olympus> has fallen. She is all that remains of the <Underworld>.

Except... There is still her heir, uncertain as his fate may be. Kim Dokja sleeps the sleep of Endymion. And his mother is before her.

“I met your husband, you know,” Persephone says.

Sookyung’s voice is as dry as the Lemnos. “I can’t imagine he was good company.”

“He was quite the charmer.”

Liars always did their best to cosy up to her. Once the Furies pulled their tongues out, they were usually far less interesting.

“Did you eat him?”

“I have better taste than that. I summoned him for a different reason.”

“Do tell.”

“It was to sate my own curiosity, really.”

Lee Sookyung’s mouth, a thin line, flattens even further. “Is that so?”

“Yes.” Persephone casts her gaze away. “Near the beginning of the scenarios, you received a prophecy. It only cost ten years of your life.”

A slight hitch at the shoulders; the only break in Lee Sookyung’s composure throughout their conversation.

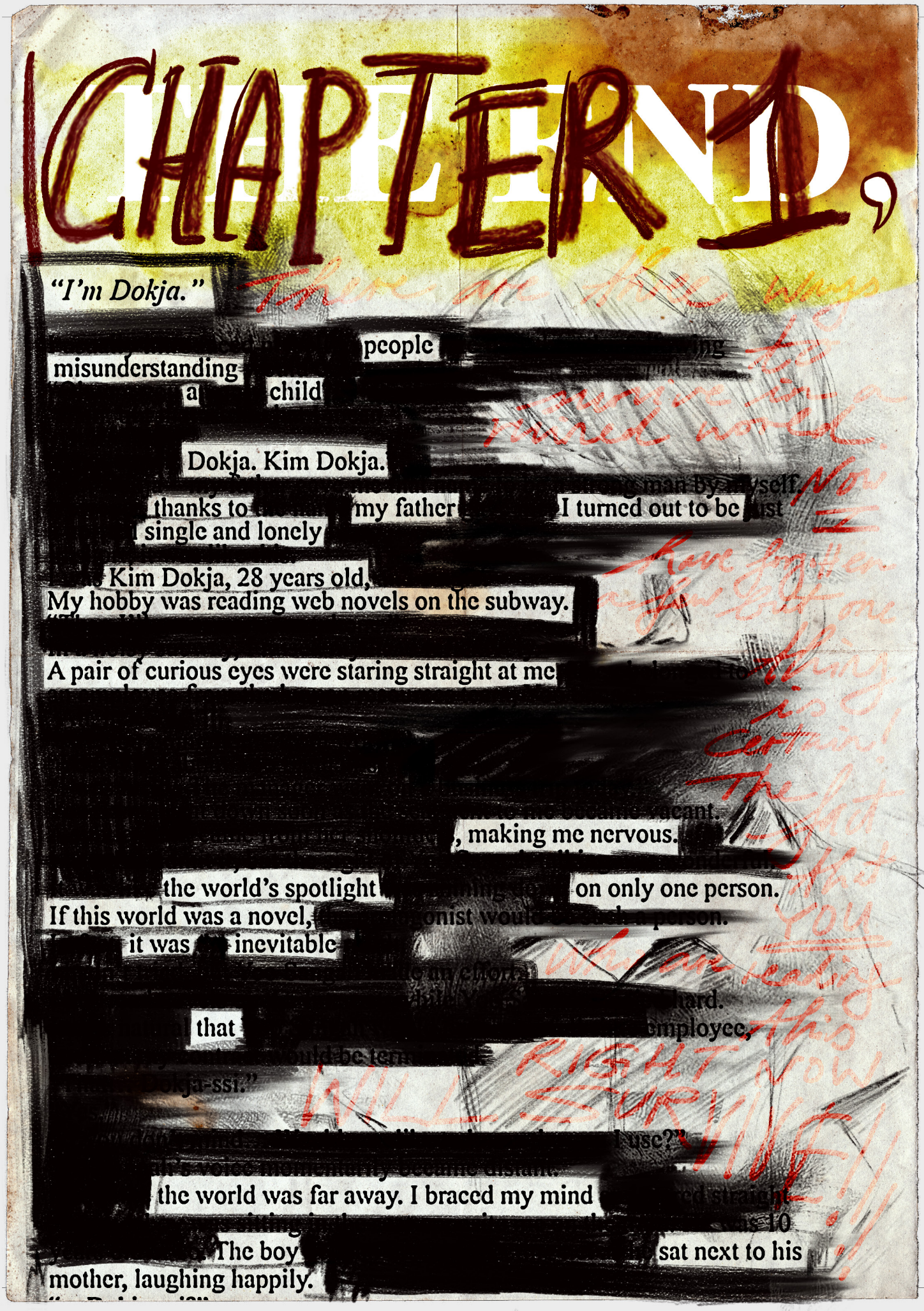
“You didn’t even hesitate.” Persephone says. “It made me wonder if you had done something like that before. But you wouldn’t see it as throwing your life away, would you? Not if it were for your son.”

“I do what I have to do.”

Persephone presses her hand back to the dirt. Perhaps it was too early for roses. Something medicinal might be better for these mortals. She feels the life taking shape beneath her fingers, the probability of what-could-be turning to the certainty of what-is.

“So did I,” she says. “So, too, did Hades.”

YOU'RE COMING TO MY GRADUATION CEREMONY, GOT IT??
by
Han Gilyoung
Dokja-ssi promised to listen to my story. A lost cartridge will always return!
LEE JIHYE
KIM DOKJA'S COMPANY!!!
Ahjussi, please come home soon, everyone misses you!!! Also, Gilyoung is [redacted]
Hyung, ignore this!!! When will you be back?
전지적독자시점
Omniscient Reader's Viewpoint
Let's go on a bicycle trip together once you return, Dokja-ssi!
How about a raise for the medical personnel?
Dareum sends her regards!
I hope the Demon King of Salvation has a great come-back!
It's time to return, you fool.
EX LIBRIS KIM DOKJA
Dokja-ssi, if you don't wake up, I'll really kill you. (P.S. Uriel says "hi")
stupid fucking idiot!!!!! you better read this!!!
YOU STILL OWE ME RENT. I TAKE INTEREST.


CHAPTER END,
"I'm Dokja."
people
misunderstanding
a child
Dokja. Kim Dokja.
thanks to my father I turned out to be
single and lonely
Kim Dokja, 28 years old,
My hobby was reading web novels on the subway.
A pair of curious eyes were staring straight at me
, making me nervous.
the world's spotlight on only one person.
If this world was a novel,
it was inevitable
that
employee,
the world was far away. I braced my mind
The boy sat next to his
mother, laughing happily.

Beautiful Maiden Uriel's Love☆Love Advice Corner!

WRITTEN BY SUNDRY

"So," Uriel says, crossing one leg over the other and sipping her strawberry milk. "Come, come. Give me the details. Don't be shy! Lay it all on me!"

"This isn't really—" Lee Hyunsung nervously clutches his cup with both hands as he looks around Uriel's apartment. "Well. Okay. So... I have a friend. Like I said. While we were talking in the store."

"Uh-huh?" Uriel nods, understandingly. She'd happened to meet Hyunsung outside, looking like he had something on his mind, and when he'd mentioned that he was worried about a relationship problem... Obviously, she just had to know more!

"And this friend entered a relationship with someone who they care a lot about, who they went through a lot with. They... worked well together."

"Right, right. And that's why they got together." Wow, anyone could tell that he's totally talking about himself and her darlingest Heewon!

"... Yeah. But, this friend is thinking about this relationship. Because..." Hyunsung trails off, looking through the window.

Uriel inches closer. "Because...?" she prompts.

"Maybe," Hyunsung says. "Um. Well... Maybe my friend's been thinking about whether or not they'd be better off apart."

Yep, just as she thought, theyWHAT

Uriel drops her milk carton. "YOU'RE BREAKING UP WITH HEEWON?!"

Hyunsung whips his head around, startled, but Uriel's already climbing over the table and grabbing him by the shoulders. "Hyunsung. Hyunsung! What!! I didn't hear about this! Did you guys fight? Are you hiding a super serious illness? It's not worth it! You shouldn't give up just yet—"

"Uriel—"

"Or! Or, did you fall in love with someone else? Nah, forget I said that. Or, is it a job thing—wait, why didn't Heewon say anything?!"

“Uriel!” Hyunsung’s hands close over her wrists, and she finally looks at him.

“This was exactly what I...” Hyunsung opens his mouth, and closes it again. His eyebrows are set in a tight, unhappy line as he loosens his grip. “Actually, never mind. I’m sorry for bothering you, but maybe this was a mistake. Thanks for the hospitality, Uriel.”

He stands up, and Uriel gently slides down towards the ground.

Ohhhh, she’s done it again. Great job putting your entire foot in your mouth, Uriel!

“Wait,” Uriel says, stepping back so that Hyunsung doesn’t have to look directly down at her. “Wait. Okay. Hold on. I’m sorry. I wasn’t expecting you to need relationship advice, especially, uh. That kind of relationship advice, so maybe my reaction was maybe... a lot? But y’know, Hyunsung... this is definitely a lot to deal with! And really, if you need someone to talk to, I’ll listen!”

Hyunsung looks at her for a very long minute. Uriel holds her breath, and tries to project genuine sincerity.

“Don’t tell Heewon about this,” he finally says. “I’m serious.”

“Okay! Yeah!” Uriel smiles again, and sits down on the floor. She pats the ground next to her. “Let’s start over. Come here, big guy.”

Hyunsung sits down next to her, leaning back against the leg of the table behind him. “Start over. Right then.”

“Um, so... the big question is, why do you want to break up?”

“I don’t think I can give her what she wants,” he says, with hardly any hesitation.

Oooh, Uriel winces internally. Classic line, really, but because it’s Hyunsung, he totally means every word. “So she’s told you exactly what she wants out of you?”

“No.” Hyunsung says. He gives Uriel a tired look. “I know what you’re going to say. This isn’t a communication problem, okay?”

“M’kay,” Uriel agrees. “So what is the problem?”

“There’s always this space between us.” Hyunsung lets out a breath. “When she looks at me, I feel like she’s only seeing the gap where— You know. Where someone else used to stand.”

Well, that’s not that big of a deal, Uriel thinks instinctively. Because causes don’t need to be present in a tangible form for you to devote yourself to them, because devotion doesn’t get in the way of love for another. But immediately after, there’s this awful pang of guilt in her heart because it is too a big deal, and she knows it, and more importantly, she knows that she shouldn’t even have thought it wasn’t in the first place. It’s not the same. She knows it viscerally, and bitterly. She sees the gap too.

Hyunsung continues to speak, while Uriel is silent. “Maybe this was wrong of us in the first place—”

“It’s not,” Uriel yells, near desperate. It wasn’t wrong. It isn’t. “Even if you’re both missing Dokja, it’s not wrong to... I mean, none of us will forget him! No, wait. Forget I just said that.”

Uriel scrunches up her hair with both hands as she searches desperately for the right words. “It’s like... I’m not saying you have to move on. I don’t think any of us could. Or would!

It's more like... it's a different kind of caring? It shouldn't be getting in the way of you and Heewon, and I hate that it does, because I think that it's possible for Heewon to be your most important person, even if you've got another most important person too, because it's different! You know? Basically, it's totally okay for you to be happy with Heewon!"

"It's nice of you to feel that way," Hyunsung says. "But it doesn't change the fact that when we're together, all I ever think about is how neither of us were ever able to save him from anything at all, in the end. I know it's the same for her."

He tilts his head back. "Now that we're not risking our lives every day, I've had a lot more time to think, about everything. I'm starting to feel that the only thing keeping us together in the first place was the fact that we were always chasing after Dokja, or waiting for him to come back."

"That's not true!" Uriel interjects, hastily. "You two work well together! Sword and shield, right?"

"Are we living in a world where that even matters anymore? When's the last time you drew your own blade, Uriel?"

Months, at least. Uriel's just... she's just been busy with her idol group, alright? And even besides that, this is a world where the scenarios no longer exist. There is no great Evil for her to slay, no great Good telling her to fight. "That's...."

Hyunsung smiles, bitterly. "So what's the point of us being a sword and shield?"

"The point's that you guys understand each other way better than anyone else can ever hope to, because you've been at her side through life and death," Uriel shoots back. "The feeling of being able to communicate without words—"

"And the only thing we communicate is how much this isn't working!" Hyunsung's voice is loud, and he sweeps his arm out in a wild gesture that hits the chair behind him. It falls over in a noisy clatter that startles them both.

With the heat of the budding argument cooled, dead silence stretches to fill the gap. Uriel's eyes sting, and she blinks, hard.

"It's not fair," she finally says. "Aren't stories like this supposed to have a happy ending?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint, Uriel." Hyunsung reaches over and holds her hand so carefully with his own. "Maybe this chapter of our story doesn't have a happy ending, you know? I think I can learn to be okay with that, as long as we're allowed to move on past it."

He sounds so resolute, Uriel thinks. The best thing that she can do is to accept that he knows what's best for him and Heewon.

"... Just one more shot," Uriel can't help but plead. "Just one, I promise I won't ask for anything more, and I know it's a lot, but I just can't... It's so sad. It's too sad for things to end like this for you two."

"Uriel..." Hyunsung's shoulders sag, and he lets out a heavy exhale. "Okay. I'll just... give it one more try."

Two weeks later, Jung Heewon and Lee Hyunsung break up.

when it's all gone

WRITTEN BY MAYA

Yoo Joonghyuk is quieter than she thought he'd be.

This is saying something, since it's not like he was ever the most talkative person in the world, but he doesn't say a word as Han Sooyoung outlines her plan: not when she says she knows his story, or at least something halfway to it, not when she says she can get them to reach the end, not when she gives up and just says, "It'll work. It has to work."

He closes his eyes for a long, still moment. Han Sooyoung wonders if maybe she got him wrong — if he'll slice her head off where she stands, like he tried to when they first met.

Finally, he says, "Will you kill me?"

She opens her mouth to tell him there's no way in hell she's letting him regress again, but then he shakes his head: a small movement, like he already knows she's thinking of the wrong answer.

He really is different than she thought he'd be.

"I will," she says. Her voice comes out stronger than she means it to be. It rings across the empty sky, like an announcement to a crowd she can't see. "I'll help you reach your ending if you help me reach mine. That's all I want."

"Mia," he says. His hand rests idly against the hilt of his blade as if it's the only place he can think to put it. "You... have to keep her safe."

Yoo Mia will die within the next thirteen months. There's no other way things can go to plan.

"I'll do my best." She says it with so much conviction that for a moment, she forgets she's lying.

Yoo Joonghyuk nods. His eyes are dark and laser-focused, even now. "We'll both reach our ending," he agrees, and that's that.

The wind is harsh today. A storm has struck, so the ground is covered with enough snow to bury someone in — enough that everyone in Han Sooyoung's company has taken shelter, enough that Han Sooyoung, if she weren't obligated to meet Yoo Joonghyuk now, would be inside with them too, planning for the next scenario instead of mumbling apologies she can't bring herself to fully mean.

It's a good thing that Yoo Joonghyuk clutched Yoo Mia's corpse as soon as she died, Han Sooyoung thinks. Otherwise, she'd be lost in the sea of white.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"Don't lie."

"I'm not." Han Sooyoung glances down at Yoo Mia's face — the slope of her brows, a mirror image of the brother Han Sooyoung taught her to hate. "She was a good kid. I..." She can't bring herself to say more, not when everything would be such obvious bullshit, so she just repeats, "She was a good kid."

Yoo Joonghyuk's eyes are hollow. "You knew she would die," he says. It's not a question.

"It was the only way."

"You lied to me."

"I did what I had to," she says. "You would do the same."

"I should kill you."

"You tried," says Han Sooyoung. She almost let him, for a moment — frozen staring at Yoo Mia's body, the weight of everyone's silence plunging her down into the earth — and then Lee Hyunsung had pushed her away from Yoo Joonghyuk's incoming blow before it could land.

She wouldn't have hesitated at all if this had happened a month ago. She's getting soft.

"You still could," she continues, forcing a small, wry smile. "I'm right here. You have your sword."

Han Sooyoung likes to think she's gotten good at cataloguing Yoo Joonghyuk's expressions by now: the rage, the pain, the hope, all betrayed by a slight tilt to his mouth. A moment where his eyes shake. On better days, when it feels like they're bound by just a little more than death and desperation, she takes a little pride in it — the thought that she knows his every emotion just as well as his companions in previous rounds did, no matter how hard he tries to hide them all.

She can't read this one, though. If she had to guess, she'd say it was disappointment, but that feels like reaching for something that isn't there.

"I won't," he says, quiet. "You're not leaving until we're done."

Yoo Mia's skin is beginning to turn blue. It's an ugly color. Han Sooyoung wonders if she should ask for the body, give her a proper burial with the rest of her companions at the funeral, but Yoo Joonghyuk's grip is white-knuckled against it.

"I'll see you later, then," she replies, and she turns around to leave.

God, she needs a cigarette.

"Look, I'm not happy either."

Han Sooyoung thinks if Yoo Joonghyuk was at full bodily capacity, he'd either scoff or strangle her. As it is, he lays immobile on the ground, tucked safely away from her companions and still, despite it all, alive. "I really thought," she continues, because it's not like he's going to say much right now, "that the fucking sword would work. I thought — we had a plan. You know that. And it almost worked; I mean, look at you right now — "

“Useless,” Yoo Joonghyuk croaks, his fingers twitching upward.

“Yeah, well.” She presses her fingers to her temples. “I have another idea. It’s... it’s not as convenient, I guess, but it’ll definitely work.” When all she gets in response is stony silence, she moves forward. “You remember the Apocalypse Dragon?”

Yoo Joonghyuk’s eyes begin to shake.

“All it takes is one false sword,” she says. “And then it’s all over.”

“You...” Yoo Joonghyuk begins. He falters. “Everyone will die.”

“Everyone will be sent into eternal sleep,” she corrects, and before he can reply, she adds, “I know it’s the same thing. That’s the point; it’s just... no more constellations. No more scenarios. It’s... it’ll really all be over.”

“You’d do that to your companions.”

“You’ve done worse to yours,” replies Han Sooyoung sharply. It’s a childish jab, crueler than she means it, but it gets Yoo Joonghyuk to shut his mouth, at least. “You’ll be sent into eternal sleep, too — or maybe with everyone gone, you’ll finally be able to...” She clears her throat. “It’ll be over for both of us.”

Yoo Joonghyuk is so angry that every part of his body is trembling — angrier than when Mia died, angrier than after he’d seen Namgung Minyoung collapse once again right in front of him. Han Sooyoung doesn’t think she’s ever seen him this filled with any emotion at all.

“I’m not happy either,” she repeats. “Look, just — are you in or not? Because this is all I can think of.”

He lifts his eyes to the sky. It’s cloudy enough that even in the darkness, they can’t see a single star. “Don’t waste time asking.”

“Then it’s settled,” she says, and she stands up, dusting her pants off. She tosses him a salve. “Apply it everywhere for a few days. You’ll be good to go. Figured you didn’t feel like navigating the Dokkaebi Bag right now.”

Yoo Joonghyuk doesn’t respond — which is better, she thinks, because then she’s not burdened with feeling anything more than she already has. He’s not burdened with having to keep up conversation with the woman he hates most in the world, probably, even after one thousand regressions of not knowing she exists. It’s easier for both of them.

In this way, at least, they’ve always understood each other.

「This tale was a story about
indistinguishable 'Good and Evil', and...」

[THE DEMON KING OF SALVATION IS LOOKING AT YOU.]

[THE MOST ANCIENT DREAM IS LOOKING AT YOU.]

second self paradox

WRITTEN BY MORNINGS

There is no beginning of a circle like it was at the close of the day, when we've drawn the exact same full-stop at every sundown. There is no beginning since they are all the same circle, do you see? See how the fire crackles over the scant twigs and logs we gathered, and you, digging that curved line into the dirt, etch in the boundary of our campground using the gold-tip of your staff. You wipe the sweat off your brow when the job is done.

"See? This'll protect us for the night. Now they can't get in," you say, and though I hear it daily, I listen dutifully since it is our script. Once the arc's battle is over, you draw the boundary, and I tend the fire. The line burns yellow once you close your hands in prayer—your magic lifts into the air, blowing a tranquil ward around us. When you join me again, I will pass you food and we will rest.

But at the close of this day, like a bite of ripe fruit, you add, "We'll stay safe at the center together." All of the circles are the same, no beginning or end, but this is the day worth noting, so we shall start here—and I'll reread the last sentence until the thrumming ache fades.

We find shelter one night in an abandoned house with half a roof. Our group is bigger then, temporarily: a few incarnations from the last calamity have joined us. They won't last, or will choose to leave us.

"Your stories resemble each other," one swordswoman says, after quietly studying our routine.

Our last companion's death has stayed too fresh in our minds for too long; but in this moment, we have hope. We don't know much about her, only that she's reliable and sturdy. My coin's bet that she was a bodyguard before the world ended; you think she was a priestess, to explain her bitter hatred for the divinities. *Then I must have been a priestess too, since I hate them just as much,* I told you, to which you merely smirked and conceded. *I haven't ruled it out for you either,* you said. We never learn. She'll be dead by the end of the next calamity.

"Isn't that how these Giant Stories work? We each get a share of the same Story?" I ask.

"She means our individual Stories, like our nativities," you say, rubbing your arms to stave off the night's chill. "Though I don't see it."

I throw my coat at you. "*My* nativity. Yours is too pitiful to be considered a legendary

incarnation's birth—"

"So you finally admit you're not the only hotshot—" You shrug it on and immediately riffle through my pockets.

"—'Man abandoned at temple; cries self to sleep; steals ancient scripture.' Where's the dignity, the pizzaz?"

"I take it back; our Stories are eerily similar," you deadpan, "The same story, one might say."

"How do you get that same story from 'Amnesiac swordsman wins wager against the gods and frees the people'? Explain to me how."

"First, that's not your nativity, try better next time," you start, pulling a cloth out. "Second, listen. Not everything is a neat storyline. I'm merely living my life in this miserable hellscape which the dokkaebi arbitrarily decided to medal. You remind me of them sometimes."

"You're a terrible friend." You pass me the handkerchief.

"I'm all you got."

I wipe my eyes with it. The campfire's smoke had been stinging them.

"True enough."

The howling won't stop, only growing louder and closer, a chorus that never hits its crescendo, an incessant drum beating until it's between your ears, until it's infected your head, until you think they have you in their jaws.

"Scared of the wind now, are we?" I ask, tearing your hands away from your bleeding scalp. My own head swims from the spell, but worse, your reddened eyes won't focus and your feet stick to the dirt—if I could cut your [ghost, 'Beaten, Broken Skin'] from your chest, I would. Would've long before now too. Instead, I swipe the blood off your forehead before it dips into your eyes. A forest stands a few meters away. If we stay out in the open longer, then they'll have us.

What more is there to fight? The previous battle should've been the last scenario—the other nebulae thought so too. Why else would the last of them, still choking on my sword, congratulate us on completing the scenario over everyone else? 'Completing,' not continuing. Another lie from the damned divinities. Even in death, they all conspire to drive us mad.

"It's just the wind, my friend, it's nothing," I lie, grabbing your abandoned staff from the ground.

"Stop spinning stories—not now," you spit out but let me sling your arm over my shoulder. It'll slow me down, but at least we won't needlessly part.

"Sorry. Let's go."

We pass into the forest, ducking behind trees, splitting shrubs, clothes and skin snagging on branches and leaves to avoid the sporadic howls. It irritates my Stories—we've overcome everything before but can't handle more beasts? If I leave you somewhere safe, I'd draw them away. As the resentment overheats my head, your arm squeezes my neck.

"Hold on," you whisper. "Do you feel that?"

You point your staff to our right; something tugs at my feet. Carefully we follow the phantom thread. The forest ineffably grows denser, forcing us to squeeze between trunks that tower over us like a giant unending wall.

The howling has stopped, as if they approve. Have we been herded onto the final path? When the thought hits me, a clearing appears with room to breathe. And in the middle, an archway.

A frustrated huff blows against our hesitant necks.

Teeth snap at our ankles.

A new song unfolds: 「...something to connect the divided two...」

"You promised to curb the characters' misery. It's us against the Dreamer, right?" I don't answer. "Oh."

No, it's—you're always questioning, never stating facts. How can a story continue without any full-stops? This is why I'm the Guardian of the Story, not you, if you'd only cooperate. With no continuous story, you'll disappear. We'll both disappear.

My sword falters, but I drive it through your shoulder, pinning you to some wall. If I looked closer, I might recognize our surroundings, so I block that impulse and the jab you aim at my throat. It doesn't matter what this place resembles, only that it's the Horizon, where you need to stay. If I take your last original story, your empathy won't hold us back.

I don't know why you would, so this isn't how it happened: arguing, wrestling, my hands are digging, or you're giving me your hands, but I don't want them, I try to give them back. I waver. I don't feel—but hear—a snap, which shocks me to a stop. I snapped it out your chest, had to, I stole it from you, it's what I planned, yet still it's lead in my stomach, still I'm not happy, since to this day still I hear your voice echoing like a thunderclap—

"Take it," you say. Your nativity curls up against my chest.

"*But what'll happen to us*," you had asked with your torso half sunk into the wall. I braced your staff side-ways cross the opening, as a grip for when you were swallowed further in. I could only say, "*We'll be alive*." Did you know then how our intentions would fade? We're not grandfather's axe or Theseus's ship. "*Alive as what?*" After you were expelled from the greatest daydream, my teeth ached: first on the right side, followed by the left. I should've dug them out, removed the inconvenience, like I did you. "*Same as we always are*." Starving, you ate any story you found to fill the hole where I ripped out your nativity. When you hold those stories in your mouth, create lumps in both your cheeks, and let them bleed into you, you will not stay the same. I, too, am different. "*Find a better lie*." You've worn out uncountable stories and names that you've forgotten the original; I've thrown away mine. "*How's this? We'll rewrite it so no one will suffer. We'll reign in those greedy dokkaebi. We'll be kings.*" If we began again, would you stay by me again? "*It only asked for you. I'm not supposed to move on.*" You let the

Wenny name wash everything out until it's your only lifeline. I've replaced piece after piece, absorbed protagonist after protagonist, reigning as the Dokkaebi King. Tiring, one day I'll lie against my handiwork and catch a rotting stern in the mouth. Teeth scattering like smashed ice. "*It's okay. Listen. You're supposed to be here with me. To the end. My friend, even during our next life, accompany me.*" We've both been dead for a long time now.

Your Second

Used to be my minute
Helped pass my hour
Crawled into my day

Never Saw
My Year
Consumed my decade

Turned into my century
And ended
our millenia

「And, this tale was a story about
tragedy locked in a cycle.」

our passage of haunting

WRITTEN BY KAIA

The only survivor of Taepung Girls High School.

This is not a title that she wanted. Lee Jihye did not want to walk out of that school alone. She didn't want to walk out at *all* but she survived and survivors had to move on to the next scenario location.

As Kim Dokja said: *Nobody "deserves" to live, but if you've survived, take responsibility!*

She walked out of that school numb and shaking, tears falling from her eyes but only vaguely aware of them. It was as if she was looking at the world through a pane of glass; she could see everything, but it was out of her reach.

Her hands still feel foreign. How does one forget the sensation of strangling another? How does Lee Jihye go through each day without breaking down to the memory of Na Bori's throat in her hands, Na Bori's fingers gentle on her wrists, Na Bori's final breaths beneath her hold?

There is an empty space where Na Bori should be. Always beside her, the absence is a ghost itself that Lee Jihye holds onto tightly; she has nothing, but this nothing is the last thing she has of Na Bori.

[Constellation 'Maritime War God' advises his incarnation to sleep.]

Lee Jihye barely glances at the message. "I can't."

[Constellation 'Maritime War God' looks sadly upon his incarnation.]

[Constellation 'Maritime War God' reminds incarnation 'Lee Jihye' that he will listen if she wants to talk.]

She looks down at her hands. They're empty, and yet—

She is a murderer, but so is everyone else that's survived this far. She is a child, but there are no children in the Star Stream. She is alone, but she is surrounded by people she will kill for and who would kill for her.

She is Lee Jihye, and she should not be here.

"Why did you choose me?" Lee Jihye asks. It's not what she wanted to say, but something between *grief* and *loss* and *rage* caught in her throat and the question came out instead. It's not something she's really thought about. Things have been too busy, and Lee Jihye *likes* busy; if she's focused on survival, she doesn't need to think about emptiness inside her that she ripped open herself.

"Why not anyone else? Someone who isn't scared of the sea? Someone stronger?"

Her throat tightens. Somehow, Lee Jihye didn't realize how much it was bothering her.

Why would she be chosen by a constellation named *Maritime War God*? There are so many better options. She's just a teenage girl, too old to be a child and too young to be called an adult. She's nothing special, just the survivor of a high school massacre done solely for the entertainment of uncaring constellations. Now that the question is out in the air, she's realizing how desperately she needs an answer.

There's a lot she's been running from, lately. This is just another.

Maritime War God is silent. Had she been outside, she would have tried to find his star, make sure he hasn't abandoned her.

But she's not.

Lee Jihye is inside, back to the wall watching everyone else sleep through the open door. She's far enough away that they won't hear her speak, but close enough to keep an eye on them. It reflects much of how she feels these days: on the outside, looking in.

She's idly counting each time she clenches her hands into fists, reaching 43 before an indirect message arrives.

[Constellation 'Maritime War God' would like to honor his friend through incarnation 'Lee Jihye'.]

[Constellation 'Maritime War God' remembers how 'Lee Eokgi' did not abandon him when others had, and wishes to return the favor by taking care of his descendant.]

Lee Jihye stares at the indirect messages. She reads them again. Then once more.

She doesn't cry, but it's a close thing.

[Constellation 'Maritime War God' understands that the weight of a life is heavy indeed, and to kill a beloved friend will hurt in a way that never heals.]

[Constellation 'Maritime War God' mourns the people he loves, who can only live on in his stories.]

[Constellation 'Maritime War God' reminds his incarnation that her friend does not blame her and gave her life so that incarnation 'Lee Jihye' can live on.]

[Constellation 'Maritime War God' hopes that one day incarnation 'Lee Jihye' can remember not only the pain, but also the love of her friends.]

Lee Jihye scrubs at her eyes roughly, ducking her head to hide her expression from view. It does nothing to stop the tears that quickly spill down her cheeks or the sob that fractures itself out of her chest.

It hurts. *It hurts.*

Being alive hurts but she has to live because Na Bori gave up her life for her. She has to live so Na Bori's death can mean something.

"How can anyone live like this?" she asks, voice weak and heavy with tears. "How does anyone survive? I want her back. *I want her back*."

Through the doorway, she catches sight of faint movement. Jung Heewon shifts, rolling away

from Lee Hyunsung to place a hand on the hilt of her sword. No one wakes. Her grief is hidden away from them for another night.

She hears more indirect messages come in, the sound calling her attention.

Swallowing heavily, Lee Jihye wipes her eyes roughly, blinking back her tears, and looks up to read.

[Constellation 'Maritime War God' recalls the day he was pushed into a lake by his subordinates after losing a drinking game.]

[Constellation 'Maritime War God' laughs at the memory of accidentally smearing ink on a friend's face after writing.]

[Constellation 'Maritime War God' reminisces about sailing on a clear summer day and tripping over a soldier who was taking a nap.]

Lee Jihye smiles. "I did that too, once. Na Bori didn't want to play volleyball so she took a nap on the floor and I tripped over her trying to get the ball."

[Constellation 'Maritime War God' is looking fondly upon incarnation 'Lee Jihye'.]

[Constellation 'Maritime War God' wishes to hear more stories from the life of incarnation 'Lee Jihye'.]

It's hard to find the words. To find a voice for her life before the scenarios. She's thought of it endlessly, in dreams and nightmares and slow moments when they could all take a moment to breathe.

Everything had ended and began the moment she killed Na Bori. She can barely recognize the girls in her memory when she's changed so much.

But she's the only one with those memories. No one else knows what she and Na Bori were like before. All they know is that one killed the other. Nothing else. Maritime War God knows nothing about the cheerful, lazy, funny girl who was afraid of insects, just as no one knows about the people he's loved and outlived.

There are no graves in the apocalypse.

In Memory Of in this world means there is only memory. They are the living graves of others.

Lee Jihye carries the ghost of Na Bori with her. This is the only way either of them can survive—one the urn, one the ashes.

But it's not the only thing she carries.

"We got lost once," she says, "On a school trip. Got distracted by a cat and when we looked up everyone was gone. They were only a block away but with the way Na Bori acted you would have thought we had been abandoned forever."

[Constellation 'Maritime War God' laughs heartily at the story and recalls how he, too, once got lost in a market following a cat.]

"Once during summer vacation we went to a park and I found a cicada shell. So I went to show her since it's not really a bug and she nearly scaled a street light to get away from me."

[Constellation 'Maritime War God' remembers his friend being scared of octopus and nearly

fighting a fisher trying to sell him some.]

There's a lull in their conversation before Maritime War God sends his final message for the night.

[Constellation 'Maritime War God' is proud of his incarnation and honored to be one of the few to hear about 'Lee Jihye' from before the scenarios.]

"Thanks," she whispers, engraving the indirect message into her memory.

It's not the Maritime General he sends the message to. Not the survivor of Taepung Girls High School.

Just Lee Jihye.

Just the girl and the friend she survives.

She is Lee Jihye, and that means something. It means something to the constellation who looks after her as best he can, to the members of the company who always make sure she has something to eat, to Na Bori who haunts her because she gave her life for Lee Jihye.

It has to mean something.

Attachment

WRITTEN BY SONA

So you should view this fleeting world—

A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream,
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.

"Sangchul, can you hear me? I can never make this... Can you hear me?"

Yoo Sangah listened as her mother fussed over her phone in the sitting room. Around the corner and down the hall, where she'd just let herself into her parents' house, something kept her walking inside and letting her mother know she was here. Something....

"I can hear you just fine, mother. Is Sangah there?"

"No, that girl is late. I told her to come by for breakfast at least, but she went on about having to drop off some documents, I don't know."

"That's too bad. Junghee is here too, Junghee–" There was the sound of fabric rustling, then her sister-in-law's quiet voice. "Good morning, mother. I hope you've eaten. Has your shoulder been feeling better these days?"

"Bless you, girl, it's much better now. That doctor friend you and the eldest boy recommended was an absolute marvel. I've sent his name to my sister, see if she can't get that problem in her neck fixed. Oh, but that's not what I called to talk about."

Yoo Sangah breathed quietly, in and out. The second hand on the clock in the hall clicked forward and she inhaled with it, five seconds in, seven seconds out.
"You know, Sangah had been telling me about her new job, just yesterday. It's at some game company, ah– what did she say it was called again? Minisoft?"

I have a position at Mino Soft, mother. It's an affiliate to Mpixel, and that's a very successful company, very fast-growing. They said I was an impressive candidate, with a bright future in the company. That in a few years, four, five perhaps, I could be considered for—

"See now, I've *told* Sangah, I told her that all these courses and certificates are all very good." Yoo Sangah could imagine the look of bemused pride on her mother's face as she spoke. "Always a good student. But she's turning 26 soon and still hasn't told me anything about who she'd like to marry! And now she wants to spend who knows how long running around in this company, wasting her youth. And when I told her this, she snapped at me! Can you believe it? Junghee, has she told you anything?"

Junghee's murmured "no" is swallowed up by her mother's weary sigh.

"What can I do with that girl... She never listens to what I say. Does she hate me, Sangchul? Why is she so ungrateful when all I do is worry for her?"

As her brother began to soothe their mother, Yoo Sangah held the breath in her chest for five seconds, ten seconds, fifteen. Her jaw ached. Her lungs ached. The clock kept ticking. When she was almost giddy with the lack of oxygen, she finally exhaled, loud and cleansing, and then stepped out around the corner and into the house.

"Sangah! Finally, you're here. Didn't you say you'd be here an hour ago, lazy girl, where have you been?"

Her mother sat on the sofa, her hand on her chest in an elegant gesture of despair. In its alcove, the small golden Buddha, the one her mother had brought with her after her marriage, glowed in the morning light. Yoo Sangah stared at it for a moment. Perhaps her mother would stand before it later, eyes wet, to pray for her daughter's simple, predictable happiness. For her own simple, predictable happiness. Those were, in the end, in her mind, one and the same.

"How should he subdue his heart?"

How can he tame all false, vain thoughts?

How can he subdue his greed?

How can he tame his enmity?

How can he conquer his stupidity?

[As I once answered Subhuti, all beings are beingless. This is why they are all beings.]

This was what Sakyamuni had said when Yoo Sangah, freshly reincarnated, asked what her new role might require of her. It was an instinct; protocol dictated that a new hire must report to employee orientation before accepting their new task portfolio.

[To declare oneself an arhat, to claim obligation as one, is to be shackled to the self. You have been set upon a path. Whether or not you seek to actually follow it is your own choice. Beyond the one favor I ask of you as my successor, I have no instructions.]

The Buddha's face did not shift from its quiet neutrality, but she could sense a certain wry amusement in his voice. [It surprises me that you would ask for any at all when you have already shamed me for my lack of conviction in escaping the scenarios.]

“I apologize for my rudeness. It was not my intent to shame—”

[My child, do not regret your words. They carried truth, as much as a mortal can possess. And Sakyamuni is among the more mortal of the names I bear. It is so. As long as you fulfill your purpose, my arhat, then you have done all that can be considered your duty.]

Sakyamuni’s answer was certainly... difficult to operationalize. But Yoo Sangah had been raised to accept the wisdom of her elders, and failing that, to pretend that she did and carry on with her own plans. So she bowed her head in respect to the great Sakyamuni. And Yoo Sangah returned to the world.

Her new heart beat in her chest. Her family were out there waiting for her, and she’d been gone for so very long. It was time for her to fulfill the only duty she wanted now.

When all is empty, to what can one be attached?

What then cannot be put down?

When one is completely empty of self, what affliction could there be?

She should have realized by now that her duties didn’t care if they were wanted or not.

The boy barely reached her knees, if that. He must’ve been three? Four? Very young. His sticky hands wound themselves in the fabric of her skirt with a baby’s sweet carelessness. Slowly, Yoo Sangah sank to the ground, her feet tucked beneath herself. The boy watched her all the while. His eyes were dark and shiny, his cheeks soft, his body round and sturdy like any well-loved, well-fed child. Yoo Sangah blinked. A thin red thread trailed behind his head, off into the distance and out of sight. She didn’t need to touch it; she did anyway, and confirmed what she already knew.

The odds of finding him like this, just along the side of the street....

Her mother’s reincarnation tugged insistently at her skirt.

“Noona.” Another tug. His face was starting to pucker with frustration. “Noona, up?”

Yoo Sangah almost laughed in his face. Not out of any unkindness, no, it was just.... It was just right that he would be such a bossy little child, wasn’t it? Wasn’t this just like her?

It was a coincidence. Sakyamuni had taught her something of the soul in the time she’d spent in his mandala. The soul was constant, but capable of infinite change. It would be meaningless to look for any trace of her mother in this life, especially within a child as young as this, but still, she just—

“Ah!”

Yoo Sangah’s head jerked up at the cry. A man was rushing toward them, a look of relieved exhaustion on his face. Immediately, the boy let go of her skirt and raised his hands into the air.

“Appa! Up!”

His father obeyed and swept him up into his arms. Their cheeks pressed together.

"You little rascal, you had me running everywhere looking for you. Where'd you go, huh, what did you— Oh, I recognize you! You're Yoo Sangah!" The man stared at her, dazed, as she straightened up again. The boy blinked at her, then turned his face into his father's neck.

She wanted him to look at her again. She wanted him to never cross her path again.

What did Yoo Sangah want?

The man was apologizing to her for his son's behavior. She heard his voice like it was echoing across a great distance; she shook her head at him without thinking, long used to his reaction. Too soon, he moved to leave, and Yoo Sangah almost seized him by the arm to pull him back.

The impulse passed. The man walked away with her past in his arms and left Yoo Sangah standing on the sidewalk, staring after him. Just as he was about to turn the corner, his son started to fidget and fuss until he let the boy down again.

In the distance, the boy seemed to glance back. She didn't know if he could see her still.

He ran off, and out of sight.

So do not be concerned about me: for all you know, I may have run ahead of you!

「This tale was a story about
a reader who wanted to change its conclusion.」

MODS

Rook

Lead & Social Media

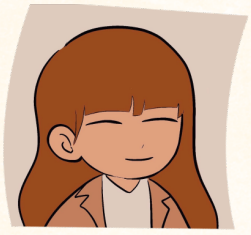
twigwing

Jay

Layout

aquabluetuna

Maya



Scheduling

leeseolhwas

sunwarmed

Sona

Discord

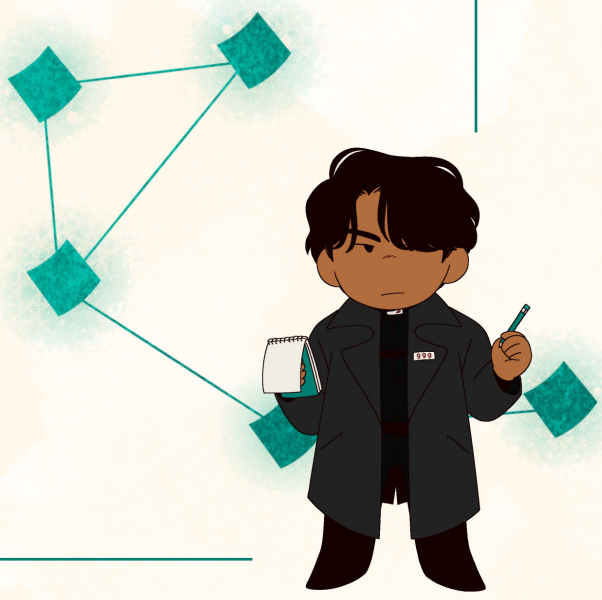
SonaSquared

SonaSona

Sajani

Zine & Discord

sanini_panini



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zerimagi

Sundry

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Kit

starblossom

Mornings

earlymorns

suncrowned

Nem

nemomosso

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celshii

celshii.art

Tange

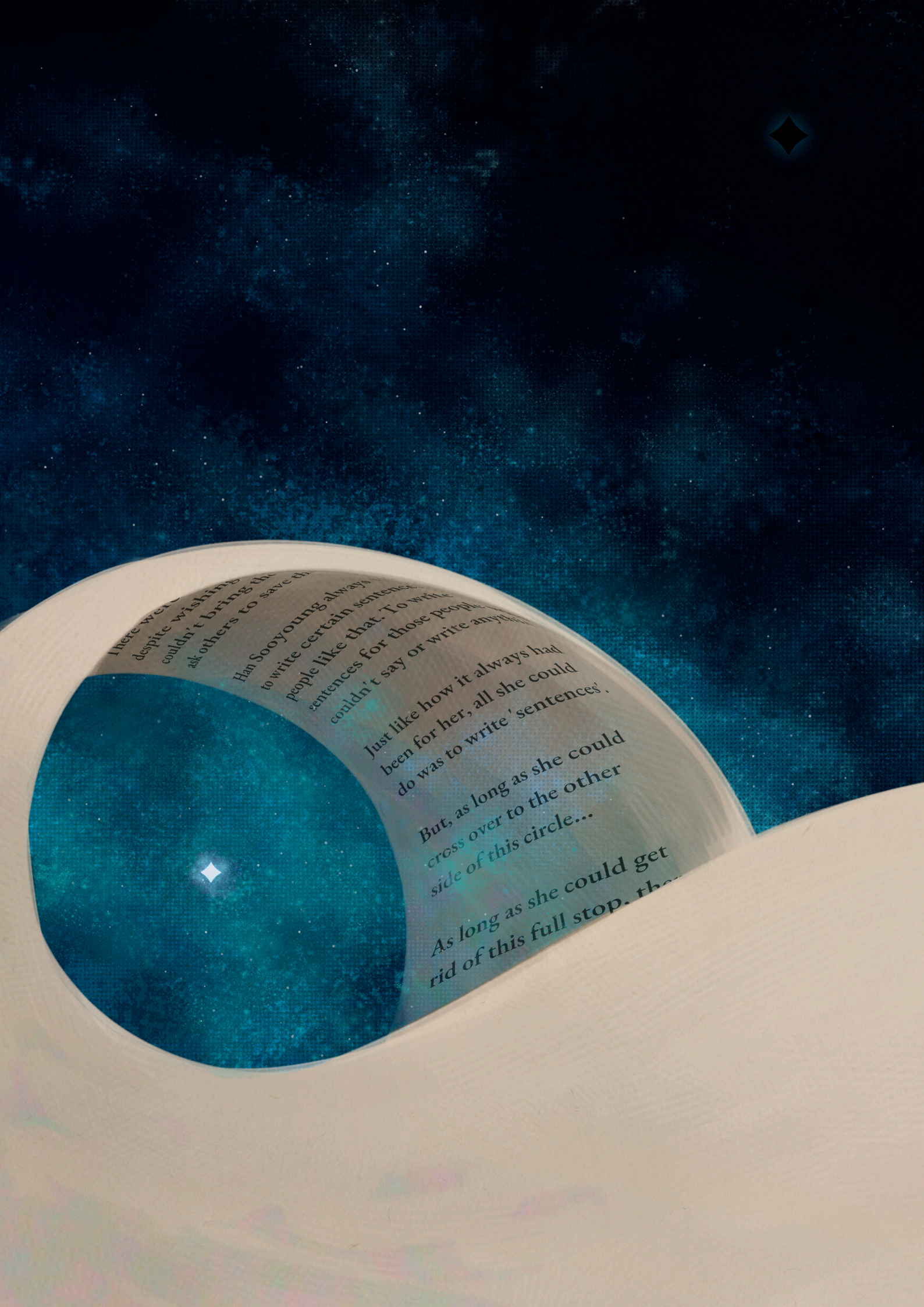
Tangerinemesss

tangerinegod

Han

bebopesque

「What would happen if there came a moment when
someone's imagination overtook the author's sentences?」


Han Sooyoung always
to write certain sentence
people like that. To write
sentences for those people
couldn't say or write anymore
Just like how it always had
been for her, all she could
do was to write 'sentences'.
But, as long as she could
cross over to the other
side of this circle...
As long as she could get
rid of this full stop, the